

Mary Chase Barney to Andrew Jackson, June 13, 1829, from Correspondence of Andrew Jackson. Edited by John Spencer Bassett.

MRS. MARY BARNEY TO JACKSON.¹

¹ This remarkable letter shows the state of mind of persons who were removed from office in Jackson's administration. Mrs. Barney, as she says, was a daughter of Samuel Chase, the bitterly partizan judge whom the Jeffersonian Republicans impeached in 1804, but without convicting him. Her husband, William B. Barney, a son of Commodore Joshua Barney, had been naval officer of the port of Baltimore since 1818. This letter, with one by her husband, was published in 1830 in pamphlet form, as evidence that Jackson was misusing the patronage.

Baltimore, June 13, 1829.

Sir, Your note of the 22 April addressed to me through your private Secretary accompanying the return of my papers, which expresses your “ *sincere regret that the rules which you had felt bound to adopt for the government of such cases, did not permit the gratification of my wishes* ,” affords no palliation of the injury which you have inflicted on a meritorious officer and his helpless family. It is dark and ambiguous. Knowing that the possession was not alone sufficient justification for the exercise of power; unwilling that your character for firmness should suffer by the imputation of caprice, or that your reputation for humanity should be tarnished by an act of wanton cruelty, you *insinuate* a cause; you *hint* at a *binding rule* , and *lament* that my husband is within its operation. If it were not unworthy the character of *Genl. Jackson* , I ask you, was it not beneath the dignity of the *President* of these United States to *insinuate* , if bold assertion had been in his power. When you had adopted for your government this *inexorable* rule was it not cruel

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in you to conceal it from those on whom it was to operate the most terrible calamities? Why should the President of a free country be governed by *secret rules* ? Why should he wrap himself up in the black robes of mystery, and like a volcano, be seen and felt in his effects, while the secret causes which work the ruin that surrounds are hid within his bosom? Is this *rule* of which you speak a law of the land; is it a construction drawn from any articles of the constitution, or is it a section of the articles of War? Is it a rule of practice, which having been acted upon by any of your illustrious predecessors, comes down with the force of *authority* upon you? Did it govern the conduct of that great Man in whose mould (according to your flattere[r]s[]) *you* were formed? If so, why should you conceal it? The constitution and the laws, civil and military, will justify you, and all who obey *them* ; and the robes of power which *you* wear cannot be stained by an act which finds a precedent in the conduct of any of your predecessors. Is it any old principle of new application in the art of government which having escaped the searching mind of Washington and the keen vision of succeeding Presidents, has been grasped by your gigantic mind? Or is a new, wholesome principle patented to you and for which you alone are to receive all the rewards of (glory at least) which succeeding ages never fail to bestow on the first inventor of a public blessing?

The Office Harpies who haunted your public walks and your retired moments, from the very dawn of your administration, and whose avidity for office and power made them utterly reckless of the honorable feelings and just rights of others, cried aloud for *Rotation* in Office. Is that magical phrase, so familiar to the Demagogues of all nations, and of all times, your great and much vaunted Principle of *Reform* ? If it be, by what kind of rotary motion is it, that men who have been but a few years, or a few months in office, are swept from the boards, while others (your friends) remain, who date their official Calends, perhaps from the time of Washington? What sort of adaptation of skill to machinery is that which brushes away those only who were opposed to your election, and leaves your friends in full possession?

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Your official Organ would impose upon the public the belief that you had adopted the Jeffersonian rule of honesty, and capacity, and that incumbents, as well as applicants were tested by that infallible touchstone. The alleged delinque[n]ci[e]s of one or two public officers have for this been made a colour; and the dye of their avowed iniquity has been spread with industrious cunning over the skirts of every innocent victim. Even of those few who have been thus charged, their misconduct (reported) was unsuspected, until the prying eyes of their *successors* came to inspect the official records of their proceedings, when *their delegated ingenuity* as in duty bound, could do no less, than find them guilty, and therefore could not have been the *cause* of their dismissal. Your's therefore is not the Jeffersonian Rule. You ask respecting incumbents and applicants *other* questions, than, "is he *honest* , is he *capable* "? and the answer to your questions decides the applicability of your Rule. By thus ascertaining what your secret rule is *not* , we may easily come to the discovery of what it is. Supposing you serious when you say you are *controulled by a rule* and that you do not move blindly like other storms, but that you have eyes which see, and ears which hear, and hence that I have not yet described your rule; there remains however but one motive which could possibly have governed you, " *punishment of your political opponents and rewards for your friends* ". This is your rule and however you may wish to disguise it, or to deceive the world into the belief that your secret principle, is something of a nobler sort, the true one is visible to every eye, and like a red meteor beams through your midnight administration, portending and working mischief and ruin. It was prescribed to you before you had the power to pursue it, by one to whom you are allied by a happy congeniality; whom you have neither the ability nor the wish to disobey, before whose omnipotent breath your presidential strength lies nerveless as infancy; who, while he suffers your heart to pursue its wonted palpitations, seems to have locked up the closet which confines your *intellect* . In this imprisonment of your mental powers, you see with his eyes, and hear with his ears. It is a misfortune for this great nation that *You* were born for him, and *He* for you. At one and the same time he is your minion and your Monarch; your priest, and your demon; your public counsellor and your bosom friend. I blush for my

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country when I see such unnatural formations, such a cancerous excrescence fastened upon the body politic, and the footstool of the President converted into a throne for a slave.

The injustice of your new Principle of “ *Reform* ” would have been too glaring, had it been at once boldly unfolded, and hence is it, that it was brought out by degrees. At first it was pretended that those only who had made use of office as an engine for electioneer[ing] purposes, were to be “reformed away”. But when it was discovered that there were in place very many of your own friends who had been guilty of this unconstitutional impropriety as you have been pleased to call it, who contrary to any feeling of gratitude or sense of duty, had stung the bosom which warmed and the hand which fed them, making use of their office in the gift of Mr. Adams as the means of furthering your designs upon the presidency to his exclusion, and that *your rule* was a “two edged sword” which if honestly born would “cut upon both sides;” it was soon carefully withheld, and finally gave way to a much more comprehensive scheme of *reform* .

It was next declared that those in office who in violence of opposition had offended you in one particular (I need not name it) should meet with *condign punishment* . Indeed you intimated in your private conversation with my husband that those who had passed that Rubicon had sealed their destruction. But the misfortune attending that rule was that there were none in office upon whom it *could* operate. Has the charge alluded to been fixed upon any individual of the multitude of those who have been *reformed* away? Was it ever even whispered in regard to my unfortunate husband. You know that it was not.

But I boldly declare that such a rule is altogether unworthy the Presidential office of a magnanimous nation! What! wield the public vengeance for your private wrongs? Hurl from the armory of the nation the bolt of destruction on your private foes? Was the power, dignity, and wealth of the Union concentrated in your person to be so misused? Had a foreign Prince or Minister committed a like offence, with the same propriety might you have made it a cause of public quarrel, and sent from the ocean and the land hecatombs of appeasing ghosts.

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The whole circumference of your *rule* at length expanded itself full to the public view; the reign of terror was unfolded, and a principle unprecedented even in the annals of tyranny, like a destroying angel, ranged through the land blowing the breath of pestilence and famine into the habitations of your enemies. Your *enemies* Sir, No. Your political opponents? You called them *enemies* , but were they so? Can there be no difference of opinion without enmity? Do you believe that *every man* who voted for Mr. Adams and who had not receiv'd from you some personal injury preferred him because he hated you? Think you, Sir, that there is no medium between idolatry and hate? It is not because you think there is no such medium, but because your elevated ambition will allow of none. This makes you look upon all those who voted against you, as your bitter foes. I most firmly believe that, saving those whom you had personally made your enemies, every honest man in giving his suffrage to Mr. Adams, obeyed the dictates of his judgement, and that many did so in violence to their warmer feelings towards you.

My husband, Sir, never was your *enemy* . In the overflowing patriotism of his heart, he gave you the full measure of his love for your *military* services. He preferred Mr. Adams for the Presidency, because he thought him qualified, and you unqualified for the station. He would have been a traitor to his country, he would have had even my scorn, and have deserved yours, had he supported you under such circumstances. He used no means to oppose you. He did a patriots duty in a patriots way. For this he is proscribed— *punished* , Oh how punished! My heart bleeds as I write. Cruel, Sir! Did he commit any offence worthy of punishment against God, or against his country or even against you? Blush while you read this question; speak not, but let the crimson negative mantle on your cheek! No, Sir, on the contrary, it was one of the best acts of his life. When he bared his bosom to the hostile bayonets of his enemies, he was not more in the *line of his duty* than when he voted against you; and had he fallen martyr on the field of fight, he would not more have deserved a monument, than he now deserves for having been worse than martyred in support of the dearest priveledge, and chartered right of American freemen. Careless as you are about the effects of your conduct, it would be idle to inform you of the depth and

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quality of that misery which you have worked in the bosom of my family. Else would I tell a tale that would provoke sympathy in any thing that had a heart, or gentle drops of pity from every eye not accustomed to look upon scenes of human cruelty “with composure”. Besides you were apprised of our poverty, you knew the dependence of eight little children for food and raiment upon my husbands salary. You knew that advanced in years as he was, without the means to prosecute any regular business, and without friends able to assist him, the world would be to him a barren heath, an inhospitable wild. You were able therefore to anticipate the heart rending scene which you may now realize as the sole work of your hand. The sickness and debility of my husband now *call upon me to vindicate* his and his childrens wrongs. The natural timidity of my sex vanishes before the necessity of my situation, and a spirit, Sir, as proud as yours, although in a female bosom, demands justice. At your hands I ask it—return to him what you have rudely torn from his possession, give back to his children their former means of securing their food and raiment, shew that you can relent, and that your rule has had at least one exception. The severity practised by you in this instance is heightened, because accompanied by *a breach of your faith solemnly pledged to my husband* . He called upon you, told you frankly that he had not voted for you. What was your reply? It was in substance this, “that every citizen of the United States had a right to express his political sentiments by his vote”. That no charges had been made against Major Barney, if any should be made, he should have justice done, he should not be condemned unheard. Then holding him by the hand with *apparent* warmth you concluded “be assured, Sir, I shall be particularly cautious how I listen to assertions of applicants for office.” With these assurances from you, Sir, the President of the United States, my husband returned to the bosom of his family. With these, rehearsed, he wiped away the tears of apprehension. The President was not the Monster he had been represented. They would not be reduced to beggary, haggard want would not be permitted to enter the mansion where he had always been a stranger. The husband and the Father had done nothing in violation of his duty as an officer. If any malicious slanderer should arise to pour his poisonous breath into the ears of the President, the accused would not be condemned unheard, and his innocence would

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be triumphant, they would still be happy. It was presumable also that possessing the confidence of three successive administrations (whose testimony in his favor I presented to you) that he was not unworthy the office he held, beside the signatures of a hundred of our first mercantile houses, established the fact of his having given *perfect satisfaction* in the manner he transacted the business of his office. In this state of calm security, without a moments warning, *like a clap of thunder* in a clear sky your dismissal came and, in a moment, the house of joy was converted into one of mourning. Sir, was not this the refinement of cruelty? But this was not all. The wife whom you have thus agonized, drew her being from the illustrious Chase whose voice of thunder early broke the spell of British Allegiance, when in the American senate, he swore by Heaven, that he owned no alligiance to the British Crown; one too, whose signature was broadly before your eyes affixed to the Charter of our Independence. The husband and the father whom you have thus wronged, was the first born Son of a hero, whose naval and military renown brightens the page of your Country's history from seventy six to 1815, with whose atchievements posterity will not condescend to compare your's; for he fought amidst greater dangers, and he fought for Independence.

By the side of that Father in the second British War fought the Son, and the glorious 12th of September bears testimony to his unshaken intrepidity. A wife, a husband thus derived; a family of Children drawing their existence from this double revolutionary fountain— You have recklessly, causelessly, perfidiously, and therefore inhumanly, cast helpless and destitute upon the icy bosom of the world, and the children and grand children of Judge Chase and Commo[do]re Barney are poverty stricken upon the soil which owes its freedom and fertility in part to their heroic patriotism.

Sir, I would be unworthy the title of an American Matron, or an American wife, if I did not vindicate his, and my children's wrongs. In this happy land the panoply of liberty protects all without distinction of age or of sex. In the severity practised towards my husband (confessedly without cause) you have injured me and my children. You have grievously injured them, without atchieving any correspondent good to individuals, to your country

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or yourself. Silence therefore would be criminal even in me, and when the honest and regular feelings of the people of this country (who cannot be long deluded) shall have been restored, and when Party Frenzy, that poison to our national happiness, liberties and honour, shall have subsided, I have no doubt that the exterminating system of "Reform" will be regarded as the greatest of tyranny, though now masked under specious names, and executed with some of the formalities of Patriotism and of liberty. It is possible this communication from an unhappy Mother, and from a female, who until now had many reasons to love her country, will be regarded by you as unworthy of notice; if otherwise, and your inclination corresponds with your power, you have still the means of reparing the injury you have done.

I am Sir